

Imperial and Epic: Philip Pullman's Dead God

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INTRODUCTION

This study relies on an examination of recent journalistic and quickly prepared scholarly responses to what we should call *the Philip Pullman controversy*. Much of the *sang froid* of an extended scholarly assessment of Pullman is currently missing. This is mainly due to the fact that we are still in the midst of a raging battle between Christian and children's literature commentators about the place of Pullman in current trends. This paper will place this controversy in perspective from a religion and popular culture viewpoint. *His Dark Materials*, the trilogy is comprised of three novels, *Northern Lights* (1995), *The Subtle Knife* (1997) and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000).¹ Each has stirred numerous souls, with the *Catholic Herald* denouncing the books as 'truly the stuff of nightmares... worthy of the bonfire.'² Additionally, there is a small episodic tale published as *Lyra's Oxford* (which I will mention below³.) Moreover, Pullman has promised a fourth volume (which will bring a Christ figure into the epic), and with a film in pre-production the battle is only really beginning. Already up for grabs are a vast range of issues, including: the nature of modern children's literature; the place of large theoretical themes such as ethics, race and post-colonialism in such a literature, the nexus between 'Church' and Christianity; the points of assimilation and conflict between religion and art, and so on.

I will essay to place many of these issues in an overall context, but I also want to address a number of the themes dredged up by those fearless journalists and commentators who in many instances have spoken too soon on Pullman. I wish to focus on a particular commentator who has possibly said the most on Pullman's work and gotten a great deal of it 'wrong.' Scurrilously, I am referring to Pullman himself who, Janus like, not only looks in the direction of atheistic humanism and operates as a major public spokesman for

¹ These will be referred to in text as NL, SK and AS, respectively. The editions quoted in this paper are: Philip Pullman: *Northern Lights*, London, 1998; Philip Pullman: *The Subtle Knife*, London, 1998 and Philip Pullman: *The Amber Spyglass*, London, 2001.

² Quoted in Robert McCrum: 'Dæmon Geezer' in *The Observer*, 27 January, 2002.

³ Philip Pullman: *Lyra's Oxford*, New York, 2003, which will be referred to in this text as LO.

ideas of godlessness in the world, but simultaneously looks in the direction of fantasy, a genre that was never lacking in spiritual ambition. In fact, it is between the **conventions** of the genres he writes within and the **conventions** he is invited to speak at that the real Pullman somewhere resides. Along the way, as this paper will conclude, the phenomenon of Pullman, both writer and commentator, reveals new takes on the genre of epic, and the life and death of not only god, but more importantly, the author.

CRITICS

The most amazing response to Pullman's trilogy has been in the presentation of awards and the development of prestigious adaptations. Not only was Pullman given the Carnegie Prize for literature, and the prestigious Whitbread Prize was awarded to the last of the trilogy *The Amber Spyglass* in 2001 (the only children's novel to be so honoured), but also a full-cast CD recording with Pullman narrating was produced (it extends over 34 hours.) Additionally, the BBC's Radio 4 completed a radio adaptation in 2003 (over 160 minutes long) and the famed Royal Theatre production developed the trilogy into a successful stage play that was, interestingly, praised by His Grace, Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury.⁴ Beyond these prizes given, and adaptations made, the reactions by critics to Pullman's work seem to fit into two categories.

The first group of critics provide the initial religious knee-jerk reaction to a series of books that deal with an almost omnipotent 'church' [or 'Magisterium'] clearly Christian in form, as something completely and utterly evil. The trilogy comes to link this organization with the Mengele-inspired experimental death camps of the Nazis [or Bolvengar – see NL, 254ff]. Strangely this link between a Nazi-like camp and the Church has not proved as controversial as that of the death of God. The books clearly lead to a scene of rather shocking pathos when an enfeebled and powerless God falls from the sky dead [AS, 432]. Thus on religious, and increasingly national grounds such critics end by warning good people against reading a work in

⁴ The stage production led to a number of on-stage discussions between the Archbishop and Pullman. The Archbishop has also agitated for Pullman's works to be on the general religion syllabus in Britain as a way of presenting a critique of Christianity. See Ronan McGreevy: 'Archbishop Wants Atheist Pullman on Syllabus' in *The Times Newspaper*, 2 March 2004, 2.

which God dies. This is certainly not a concept that should be alien to us one hundred years after Nietzsche, yet 'God's' death in *The Amber Spyglass* is taken by some to be a loss of innocence in the 'nursery.' Peter Hitchens in the *Spectator* of 18 January 2003 writes:

Pullman's chaotic universe has no ultimate good authority, controlling and redeeming all. God, or something claiming to be God, dies meaninglessly in the third volume of his trilogy. There is life after death, but it is a dark squalid misery from which oblivion is a welcome release.⁵

Whereas C S Lewis is Christian, conservative and represents everything wonderful about a good British childhood, Pullman, says Hitchens, is being canonized by the atheists, for they can now pull Lewis off the shelves and feed their children *His Dark Materials*. Hitchens suggests, as many have, that without God everything is possible⁶ especially in young minds. Pullman is structured, therefore, as more dangerous than the anti-Christ for he has become instead the anti-Lewis. He is not only against Christianity but also, and ultimately, anti-British. He is, infers Hitchens, the harbinger of a new age of doom in the nursery. The inference is that small children still in swaddling clothes are having God ripped from them. In an earlier article, this time in *The Mail on Sunday*, 27 January 2002, Hitchens declared Pullman to be '...the most dangerous author in Britain.'⁷

Similarly, websites such as the Christian 'Facing the Challenge' put a similar argument to Hitchens' and try to suggest that Pullman's supposedly mechanistic universe goes against scientific evidence.⁸ It also tries to gear its readers to considering defensive tactics against the book in preparation for the coming Hollywood blockbuster. The site suggests that the *Harry Potter* controversy will seem small compared to the storm that will erupt around the coming film.⁹ The most fascinating battle, however, can be found in the eight-hundred-plus reviews that readers have attached to the entry for *The Amber Spyglass* at Amazon.com. Here, between parents warning their good

⁵ Peter Hitchens: 'A Labour of Loathing' in *The Spectator*, 18 January 2003.

⁶ 'Without God Everything is Possible' seems to be Dostoyevskian in origin but has been traced more recently to a misquote by Sartre of the Russian author, see www.infidels.org/library/modern/features/2000/cortesi1.htm and also Stephen Ruth: www.vuw.ac.nz/chaplains/issues/withoutgod.

⁷ Peter Hitchens: *Mail on Sunday*, 27 Jan 2002, 63.

⁸ See www.facingthechallenge.org/pullman, site accessed 23 August 2004.

⁹ Ibid.

Christian compatriots to avoid the book, are testimonials from young readers explaining how they read the book against their parents' wishes and highly recommend the read.

The second group of critics, most often seeking understand Pullman more profoundly, place him in a lineage back to Tolkien, Carroll and others¹⁰ with the most crucial link being to C.S.Lewis' *Narnia* series.¹¹ The comparison with Lewis is highly complex and brought on both by the success of the books, their overtly propagandistic dimension, and Pullman himself who has regularly attacked the older work as 'grotesque, disgusting, ugly' and apparently 'racist.'¹² In an article from *The Observer*, in 2001, Pullman makes his comments on Lewis most clear, 'I hate the Narnia books, and I hate them with a deep and bitter passion, with their view of childhood as a golden age from which sexuality and adulthood are a falling away.'¹³

On the point of violence, Rayment-Pickard is not alone in showing where Pullman has erred in attacking Lewis by citing Pullman's own work. 'It is difficult to square Pullman's moral ambivalence about violence with his scathing condemnation of the train crash [in the Narnia series.]'¹⁴ Rayment-Pickard continues by quoting Pullman:

[One of the things] I find particularly objectionable in Lewis [is] the fact that he kills the children at the end. Now here are these children who have gone through great adventures and learned wonderful things and would therefore be in a position to do great things to help other people. But they're taken away... he kills them all in a train crash. I think that's ghastly. It's a horrible message.¹⁵

¹⁰ The comparison to J K Rowling is constant. I would argue that this is primarily because of this author's ubiquity as the modern paradigm of a successful children's author. No critics I know of have made a serious attempt to compare the literary output of Rowling and Pullman. See for example, Sarah Lyall: 'In British Author's Trilogy, Great Adventures Aren't Pegged to the Great Beyond' *The New York Times*, 7 November, 2000, E.1. See also William Flesch: 'Childish Things' in *The Boston Globe*, 13 June, 2004.

¹¹ Lewis and Tolkien are constantly referred to in Rayment-Pickard and Loy and Goodhew, see Hugh Rayment-Pickard: *The Devil's Account: Philip Pullman and Christianity*, London, 2004, *passim*, and David R Loy and Linda Goodhew: *The Dharma of Dragons and Daemons: Buddhist Themes in Modern Fantasy*, Somerville, 2004, *passim*.

¹² See Peter Hitchens, *The Spectator*, 18 Jan 2003.

¹³ Ed Vulliamy, 'Author Puts Bible Belt to the Test' in *The Observer*, 26 August, 2001.

¹⁴ Rayment-Pickard, *op cit*, 45.

¹⁵ In Rayment-Pickard, *op cit*, 45, originally from an interview with Susan Roberts, 2000.

Rayment-Pickard compares Lewis' action¹⁶ with the seemingly moral vacuum that accompanied Pullman's killing of Roger [NL, 250] which we will consider below. What remains ghastly for Pullman, as it was for me when I read the *Narnia* series as a child, is not the simple death of the heroes, but the recognition by Lewis that both this world and *Narnia* have a particular (lesser) value when set against the paradise of the Christians.¹⁷ As you can see, Pullman wants the heroes of *Narnia* to remain in this world and bring the boon earned by their adventures to bear on the value of our world and so '...do great things to help other people.' This is, of course, standard completion of the hero's journey as far as Campbell is concerned¹⁸ and Pullman makes it clear that the classical progression of a tale must be adhered to for it to really work.¹⁹ Lewis' need to subvert this convention by the insertion of Christian propaganda through the *Narnia* series finds its match in Pullman's insertion of anti-Christian propaganda in *His Dark Materials*.

In this way *His Dark Materials* is also a work of criticism, or we might say a ficto-critical response to Lewis. In fact we should keep in mind that his work is its own critique of its own genre. It is a rewriting Lewis in order to turn the strong Christian premise that surges beneath the *Narnia* series. To understand the complexities of this connection we need to consider the genre of *His Dark Materials* more closely.

THE NATURE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND THE DEATH OF GOD

These two general directions by critics are more tightly enmeshed in the complex battle over the nature of children's literature. Pullman has made clear that his form of writing encompasses the last textual

¹⁶ See C.S Lewis: *The Last Battle*, London, 2001 [1956], 170ff.

¹⁷ It is a paradise that includes the essence of both England and Narnia: "Why!" exclaimed Peter. "It's England. And that's the house itself – Professor Kirke's old home in the country where all our adventures began!" ... "I thought that house had been destroyed," said Edmund. "So it was" said the Faun. "But you are now looking at the England within England, the real England just as this is the real Narnia. And in that inner England no good thing is destroyed," *ibid*, 222.

¹⁸ Joseph Campbell: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, New York, 1949, 172ff.

¹⁹ See Philip Pullman: 'Voluntary Service' in *The Guardian*, 28 December 2002 '...and I have too much regard for the classic stories to go against a pattern as successful as that.' Moreover Rayment-Pickard, also emphasises Pullman's ability to be directed by the story, *op cit*, 23-27.

space in which **grand narratives** once found in the likes of Milton, Blake and their like can still be approached. He is thus very much of the 'devil's party.' This can be seen in Pullman's approach to the death of God. Rayment-Pickard attempts to show that, after Nietzsche, Pullman is locating his readers within a post-modern climate where God simply does not count: 'Pullman is presumably saying that religious power lies with human theocracies rather than with God himself. There is no real theological power, only **theocratic** power, the power of religious institutions.'²⁰ Pullman, of course, complicates this issue through the mouths of numerous characters. The first approach comes from the supremacy of dark material, or 'dust' as it is better known in the novel, as the general every-existing force that compels and creates existence. One angel, Xaphania, knows that the Yahweh of the Bible (The Authority) was simply the first being of consciousness to sprout from this dark matter or dust. This first example of consciousness then convinces those who come after it that it was indeed the creator [AS, 33-34]. As Xaphania realises the truth, this angel must be expelled from heaven. Is Pullman therefore suggesting a mechanistic universe with a deceiving God, or simply deferring a possible proof for the existence of an ultimate creator God? It may be that the universes Pullman has created are on evolutionary automatic. Hell, as a death camp, is clearly the creation of 'the authority' but whither heaven? The closest we come to an answer is to be found in the mouth of King Ogunwe's:

It shocked some of us too to learn that the Authority is not the creator. There may have been a creator, or there may not: we don't know. All we know is that at some point the Authority took charge, and since then, angels have rebelled, and human beings have struggled against him too [AS, 221-222].

Therefore the death of Pullman's Yahweh is actually the demise of a self-deluding demiurge in the Gnostic mould while the ultimate creator is still a distant Gnostic possibility. Between the lines, God in Pullman's work isn't dead at all. It is not surprising that Pullman mentions these Gnostic possibilities in one of his public discussions with Rowan Williams.²¹ He leaves open, as I will suggest below, he must, the possibility of God:

²⁰ Rayment-Pickard, op cit, 77 (Rayment-Pickard's emphasis).

²¹ See. <http://www.hisdarkmaterials.org/article434.html> which gives an overview of the Williams-Pullman discussion.

Imperial and Epic: Philip Pullman's Dead God

The word that covers some of these early creation narratives is gnostic - the Gnostic heresy, as it became once Christianity was sort of defined. The idea that the world we live in, the physical universe is actually a false thing, made by a false God, and the true God, our true home, our true spiritual home is infinitely distant, far off, a long, long way away from that.²²

This is an attitude that would leave dyed-in-the-wool atheists disappointed. It is a point, however, that many of Pullman's most vicious critics cling to. Hitchens, like others asks:

If there is no God, then who makes the rules of the supernatural world which Pullman creates, in which people have visible souls called daemons; magic knives cut holes between worlds and spectres devour life? How is it that the dead live on in a ghastly underworld of unending misery and torment, yet there is no heaven?²³

Nietzsche presents us very cleverly with a third-hand account of the death of God. Nietzsche's account is the tale of the madman who wanders about with a lamp lit in the middle of the day storming into a village to ask if anyone has seen God and concluding that He must be dead; that we killed him. Moreover, the madman adds:

What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not perpetually falling? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? As we not straying as through an infinite nothing?²⁴

²² Philip Pullman: 'The Dark Materials Debate' in *The Telegraph*, 17 March 2004. Pullman adds, 'The figure of The Authority is rather easier. In the sort of creation myth that underlies *His Dark Materials*, which is never fully explicit but which I was discovering as I was writing it, the notion is that there never was a Creator, instead there was matter, and this matter gradually became conscious of itself and developed Dust. Dust sort of precedes from matter as a way of understanding itself. The Authority was the first figure that condensed, as it were, in this way and from then on he was the oldest, the most powerful, the most authoritative. And all the other angels at first believed he was the Creator and then some angels decided that he wasn't, and so we had the temptation and the Fall etc - all that sort of stuff came from that;' 'And the figure of Authority who dies in the story is well, one of the metaphors I use. In the passage I wrote about his description, he was as light as paper - in other words he has a reality which is only symbolic. It's not real, and the last expression on his face is that of profound and exhausted relief. That was important for me. That's not something you can easily show with a puppet to the back of the theatre.'

²³ Hitchens: *Mail on Sunday*, 27 Jan 2002.

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche: *The Gay Science*, translated by W Kaufmann, New York, 1984, 125.

Without a plan we have made of the madman what we have, suggesting that Nietzsche was by this device predicting the modern world where such hitherto 'historical' concepts as divine provenance cease to be part of our grand-narrative of who we are, in fact, with this axial point gone, how can we even have a grand narrative; this has become a central tenet of postmodernism.²⁵ Rayment-Pickard, however, shows that for Lyra and Will their journey through the plot is hardly anything less than morally certain.²⁶ We can declare that, working inside the genre he has chosen, Pullman sets values in stone and allows grand narratives to abound. Destiny is inscribed in the character's actions and the alethiometer, a compass-like predicting machine that Lyra utilises shows her a certain road towards victory over the Church. One great grand narrative is in how Pullman's trilogy is able to suggest that it can encompass the great story of our cosmos, as described in recent speculations and 'proofs' of physics. This is then linked to another great grand narrative; that of Western cultural triumph. Both these are tied in with speculations on what being human (or more to the point, being British) really means. Pullman's work could not exist without its Biblical references, primarily through the poetry of Milton. His work is clearly supernatural and fabulous. So, if Pullman is the atheist he is continually proclaims himself to be, what is the unifying theme of the trilogy? Is it his atheistic message? No, clearly the theme of the work is to revivify the genre of Epic and that this quest overrides any of the atheistic propaganda with which Pullman might lace the books.

EPIC

When we distil the idea of Epic from Homer to Virgil, Dante, and on to more regional works such as the Montenegrin epic of Njegos, *The Luca Mikrokozma*,²⁷ and the Finnish *Kalevala*,²⁸ what we find is the idea of destiny, whether of a hero or a nation. This destiny embodied in the characters translates into the destiny of a people; those who use the book not only as literature but as totem in a Durkheimian sense. Epic highlights the particularity of a race, group or nationality

²⁵ See 'Grand Narrative' in Stuart Sim: editor, *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, London, 2001, 261-2.

²⁶ Rayment-Pickard, op cit, 41.

²⁷ Roland Clark: 'The Dark Side in Njegos and Milton' in C Hartney and A McGarrity, editors, *The Dark Side*, Sydney, 112-119.

²⁸ See Craig Cormack: *Kurrikka's Dreaming*, Roseville, 2000.

or often, as is clearly the case with Dante, both a national *and* a linguistic electorate. Even the great anti-Epic, Joyce's *Ulysses*, has come to represent the quintessence of Irishness. We should then ask, if Pullman is entering this Epic arena, to what extent does *His Dark Materials* fit the category?

The first Epic space we notice in *The Amber Spyglass* is the book itself, the way it is laid out. Each chapter starts with a black block of print with a quote raised in white. It is as if these quotes are ancient mirrors reflecting the black-on-white text of Pullman. And by these quotations we see that *His Dark Materials* trilogy [this phrase itself is a quote from Milton²⁹] stakes its place in lineage after numerous canonized British authors.³⁰ There are six 'foreigners' who are quoted, named Ezekiel, St John, Genesis, Kings I, Exodus, and Job. Of all these voices, Blake and Milton reappear constantly and although they represent that English line of dissenters – a line Pullman in one interview linked himself with: 'I'm of the devil's party, like Milton.'³¹ They also represent most strongly the repositioning of God's (epic) story on English soil or through English mouths. It is clear that within this grand narrative of authorial voices Pullman, using the death of God as a device to retell and recreate the Epic story of heaven and hell from a soundly British perspective. This is Pullman's true debt to Milton as Lenz shows in her essay.³²

As I said, Epic is not simply about selves and journey; it is also about a particular existence and so to the parameters of the hero within a nationalist or cultural perspective. It is not surprising that Pullman says he is taking on the whole issue of humanity as he sees it. The Epic is his background genre for in a way the epic dimensions of Lewis drive him there. Moreover in the twenty-first century, such epics can only find themselves a place in the world of the 'young adult' story: a theme, as Pullman said in his Carnegie award speech, '...too large for adult fiction [must be] dealt with adequately in a children's book.'³³ Perhaps, indeed in a world of postmodern *bricolage*, *ennui*, and self-reflexive knowingness, the children's book

²⁹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, London, 2001, II, 910-920

³⁰ The voices quoted in this way include Byron, Marvell, Coleridge, Donne, Spenser, Blake, Rosetti, Dickenson (only these two women are quoted), Webster, Herbert, Keats, Ruskin and Milton.

³¹ As noted in Hitchens: *Mail on Sunday*, 63.

³² Millicent Lenz: 'Philip Pullman' in *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction*, Peter Hunt and Millicent Lenz, editors, London, 2001, 123.

³³ Archived at www.randomhouse.com/features/pullman/philippullman/speech.

is the last place left where epic can flourish. Or maybe this was always truly the case when we consider the educational uses of Homer in the Athens of Pisistratus, or the *Aeneid* and its uses during the rise of Augustus and his heirs. The use of epic and strong Christian themes (albeit with a Gnostic tint) explain why the Archbishop of Canterbury is so willing to promote the play and the books.

EPIC = EMPIRE

It is through the genre of Epic that we find a real use for colonialist readings of Pullman. He presents us with two clear divisions in his trilogy and these say much. First is the division between Epic and the human, second that between the adult world and childhood. But suggesting that his take on the Epic world is universal, Pullman is in fact extending his idea of (a British) Empire long after it is physically dead. The connection between Epic and Empire is innate. As the empire proclaims and justifies a particular world-view, the essence of national 'destiny' begins. Moreover, epics are able to provide maps that permit the mapping out(wards) of spaces that clearly have elevated centres and depressed peripheries. In a series of fantasy novels where it seems there are multiplicities of possible worlds, it might be hard to imagine that there is any sort of imperial centre. But, of course, there is: Oxford. Oxford reappears in the two main worlds. The Oxford of Lyra's world parallels, in a familiar-not-familiar way with the Oxford of Will's world, which, of course, is the Oxford of our reality. This centre of Pullman's myriad worlds is an imperial city. When we look at the small *post-scriptum Lyra's Oxford*, 2003, we see that it is the city as a centre where explorers set out either on daring adventures into the unknown, or on comfortable boats to the exotic East. As far as Edward Said's expositions on Orientalism are concerned, the idea of Oxford becomes not the *axis mundi* of all Occidental viewpoints of an exoticised East, but an *axis mundorum* as such, that is an axis duplicated for all the worlds.

The deliciousness with which Pullman describes this world, (and with the intricacies of Jordan College, Oxford, I think, have no equal in fiction outside of the great palace that we find in Michael Moorcock's recreation of psuedo-London in *Gloriana*³⁴) leads us to speculate that Lyra's Oxford is a desired, ideal and almost fetishised centre from

³⁴ Michael Moorcock: *Gloriana of The Unfulfill'D Queen*, London, 1978, *passim*.

which all understanding radiates. It is for us a monarchical, secretive, aristocratic world of Latin scholars and class privilege. It has a calendar that works by harvests and fair days and the migration of gypsy-like gyptians. Let us be frank, it is a Feudal world lovingly recreated and deliciously experienced. The deliciousness comes because we experience it **through** the eyes of someone who is already in a privileged position. Lyra, common speaking though she is, remains an aristocrat. She could not possibly be a child of workers at the Eagle Iron Works or typesetters at the Fell Press. This world is hers by right of inheritance. When Pullman claims he is pulling down the old abode of the gods and establishing in the imagination of our children 'the republic of heaven' must we understand that these elite pleasures are the sugar around his pill of spiritual democracy? Post-colonial discourse has failed us to the extent that the effects of empire on colonies are the main focus of study – but what about old centres? It is quite clear that Pullman in his way has reinvigorated an empire of childhood, one that Lewis, Tolkien have also participated in. In the nursery, as it were, Britannia still rules the waves. The rest of the world is happy to buy both a British point-of-view and the message implicit in this.

THE MOST EPIC – SPEAKING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

This idea of fantasy, as familiar but not too familiar, is reified most strongly when strange but not too strange Bolvangar appears mid-way through *Northern Lights*. This is the northern camp in Lyra's world where they separate the daemon from the child in order to artificially capture Dust or consciousness. We see something like it in the venture that Lyra and Will make to hell [AS 267]. If Bolvangar captures some of the 'shades of the Mengelian horrors of the Nazi era'³⁵ then the picture is completed by the venture into hell. Here we have two children, linked by the 'race' of childhood (and opposed to the race of adults) who, through their innocence, are able enter the bland administrative horrors of an Auschwitz. But is it here that the guilt and dis-ease that Lyra is feeling over the death of her friend Roger, manifest. Roger, her cherished but lower-class playmate, accompanies Lyra on her journey to her father's base up North. Lord Asriel, in order to break the breach between worlds, needs a sacrificial victim to mine the Dust to make the gap. At first he latches onto the girl, until he discovers she is his daughter. Roger is killed

³⁵ Lenz, op cit, 127.

instead. Rayment-Pickard has noted that Pullman treats this act of infanticide by one of his heroes (Lord Asriel) without moral comment: at no time is this character's '... crime ... discussed nor is the rightness of his action ever questioned. Indeed, Lyra takes the blame upon herself ...'³⁶ Partly the murder works as a metaphor for race crime (in this case an adult-to-child crime), partly, as Rayment-Pickard suggests, it is an action in a world lacking morality, yet it also works as a failure on Lyra's part, of *noblesse oblige*; as a privileged member of this world, it was her duty to protect the lower-born. She did not. I suggest it is from this feudal complex that her guilt arises. It is a collective guilt embodied in one character just before that character is able to assuage all guilt by her subsequent actions.

For the first quarter of *The Amber Spyglass* Lyra is in a deep sleep, put there from her mother trying to keep her from the clutches of the Church who realize all too late that Lyra has some part to play in the unravelling of religion as they know it. This sleep is also a metaphor for the lack of action that comes after we have committed a moral crime. It is the silence of refusing to face up to one's role: more importantly, one's parents' and ancestors' role in crime. As Lyra sleeps, drugged into inaction, she is wracked by nightmares of Roger.

We find also, in a reverse image of this need to settle parental actions that Will also longs to travel into hell to speak again with his father. To enter that space of the otherworld which lives brightly in the convention of the epic genre from Dante's *Inferno* to Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid*, to that original epic, Gilgamesh, heroes travel to the land of the dead. Yet in the twenty-first century this Hades must be recognized as having something of the death-camp about it. When Orpheus travels to Hell, for example, he faces Cerberus, a single mythical beast who stands on guard. He knows he can get Eurydice out not because he must climb the walls of that place, but so long as he does not look back; it is a mythically-conditioned escape. The Pullman version of Hell, however, is a camp surrounded by merciless guards or harpies. They conjure our death-camp atmosphere, and so help develop a very twentieth century epic.

THE EVOLUTIONARY AND AUTOMATIC UNIVERSE

³⁶ Rayment-Pickard, op cit, 41.

But, back to Hitchens' question – where is heaven in all this? The other significant part of *The Amber Spyglass* is the world that Mary Malone, ex-nun, atheist-anthropologist stumbles into. Rayment-Pickard suggests that the Malone plot has no point except that Pullman places in her mouth more anti-Church propaganda.³⁷ What we do have in the world Mary Malone steps into is a pre-lapsarian paradise. It is so perfectly formed that interference caused by the opening up of worlds to each other must be stopped. To protect its ideal purity, Will and Lyra must eventually return to their worlds and never meet again. Will must use his subtle knife to close up all the holes that exist between worlds if ecological harmony throughout all the worlds is to reign. Dare we ask the political and racial implications of an ending where everyone returns to their place, both socially and racially? But back to Mary Malone: she takes on, represents, highlights, elevates, human consciousness as it would work in a completely different environment. It is perhaps too familiar that she becomes a participant-observer in the anthropological mode. Malone mutates into the snake-to-be when the Garden of Eden scene is restructured at the end of the work but without the pejorative associations attached to this figure in the monotheistic traditions. As well as enabling Pullman to retell the Genesis story as an inspired (again almost Gnostic) tale, Mary has another purpose. We read in the *Amber Spyglass*, Mrs Coulter noting,

And then I learned that witches' prophecy. Lyra will somehow, sometime soon, be tempted as Eve was – that's what they say ... And now that the Church knows that, too, they'll kill her. If it all depends on her, could they take the risk of letting her live? ... If they could they'd go back to the garden of Eden and kill Eve before she was tempted ...³⁸

As readers we are more concerned with the possibility that a fundamentalist Church assassin will kill Lyra before the end of the book. What we miss is that at this stage, Pullman's book has been taken over by the need to frame the ending in very biblical terms. The journey has been fascinating but as atheistic and mechanist propaganda, *His Dark Materials* leaves a lot to be desired.

CONCLUSIONS

³⁷ Rayment-Pickard, op cit, 53-54.

³⁸ Pullman, *Amber Spyglass*, op cit, 217.

When I make the point that Pullman is speaking in these novels within a strong Imperialist, conservative, nationalist and religious genre, despite the death of God, we can see that Pullman cannot escape from a particular discourse whose boundaries are dictated directly by the mode within which he writes. His words are those which most Christians would strongly understand. Moreover, his discourse on religion in the trilogy is far more complex than his statements in the flesh make out. In real time Pullman has become an outstanding spokesman for the atheist cause: in his novel a pure mechanical universe is jettisoned for a Gnostic mysticism and the open possibility of God's deferral. His extinguishment is quite another matter. Those Christians who rail against the books for the death of God scene have missed the point. In sum, Pullman cannot reply to Lewis, engage with the genre of epic and fantasy and convince us of the minor atheistic developments in these books. Moreover, Pullman is clearly a British author focusing on the imperial centre of Oxford. In these texts it is his focus on the occident as the only true place of subjectivity that reigns-in, rather than gives vent to his atheism.

The East remains exotic; rather than a viable alternative consciousness within which problems posed by monoliths such as his Church simply fall away. If Pullman was less Oxonian in his outlook he may have realised that Eastern thinking permits a way to speak of atheism that avoids becoming trapped in Christian, Western and nationalist discourse. It leads one to wonder if Pullman despises Lewis because, in part, Lewis together with more standard young-adult fiction authors, has set the rules from which Pullman cannot extricate himself? Particularly, as he often says, it is the story that ultimately must be served by the author? It would seem so. Ultimately in this trilogy so far Christians really have nothing to worry about. Nor do journalists who feel Pullman is the most dangerous author in Britain. The truth is Pullman is making himself into the quintessential British writer of his age. Rowan Williams has already seen this. Pullman is not the anti-Lewis. He has, however, fashioned a twenty-first century epic that I predict will become more and more popular because it does not cancel out the influence of Lewis; rather it embellishes it fantastically. Beyond the religious concerns of this paper, Pullman remains an outstanding writer. He has, however, spoken with an equivocal voice on issues which will be long debated. He has not fashioned the ultimate atheists children's book. That is yet to come, perhaps in the fourth instalment of this series yet to be published, the more strident atheists amongst us will become more

Imperial and Epic: Philip Pullman's Dead God

satisfied with the propaganda side of his writing. Even if we do not, it is clear that numerous Christians are already armed for the next battle.